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Survey of U.S. Federal Prison Libraries

by

Miriam Roe

1925

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SURVEY OF
U. S. FEDERAL PRISON LIBRARIES.

This survey has for its foundation the statistics given in the annual reports of the attorney general of the U. S. By "Prison population" is meant "The number of U. S. prisoners in confinement in the U. S. penitentiaries at Atlanta, Georgia; Leavenworth, Kansas; and McNeil Island, Washington; the Government Hospital for the Insane; the National training school for boys; and in State institutions other than county jails (that is, the penitentiary class of United States prisoners)". This definition is quoted from the reports.* Those prisons which were found reported on in detail and which are used in making this survey are those at Leavenworth, Kansas; Atlanta, Georgia; McNeil Island, Washington; together with the National training school for boys, and the National Training school for girls.

The prison population was found to vary from 4,021 in 1915 to 7,667 in 1924 and shows an average for the ten years of 5,245.

No record was found of any trained librarian serving this segregated group of people.

It was difficult to secure such financial statistics as could be compared. For while in the Leavenworth statistics are found definite items such as library books, periodicals and supplies; and again books, library and technical; in the statistics for the Boys training school is such an item as "Books, stationery, printing, periodicals and entertainment".

* for 1915/16

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Yet in the statistics of the latter no mention is made of any library, and no percent of this item could be considered as "books" alone. In the reports for the National training school for girls there was one item "School expenses, books, etc", and again "Books", but no library expense item as such was found.

In the statistics of circulation the circulation of magazines, which was no small item when it was recognized, has been ignored because it was not always definitely reported.

In the reports of one of the prisons was the report of the Catholic chaplain as well as of the protestant chaplain who generally seemed to be acting librarian. This too was omitted because it was difficult to tell if the report of one chaplain might not possibly overlap the report of the other; and also because only in this one prison were there the two chaplains' reports given.

For this 5,245 prison population the average cost per day per person is in almost every report,where given at all, given as being less than a dollar.

In a couple of late issues of the Atlantic Monthly there have been two articles entitled "The pound of flesh", and "Merely justice". Coming out just now when I was busying myself with this report they had a very real interest for me. If people of the low grade of mental development depicted in these articles could appreciate an intellectual challenge and stimulus as they did, surely it should be granted them while they are in prison, if from prison they are supposed to come forth to be better citizens than before they went in.

If some four thousand men read 149,620 books a year as

they are reported as doing in one prison there would seem to be no limit to the good which the right kind of a librarian with the right sort of a collection of books could do in such a place.

If the average cost per day per person were raised even just to $1.00 and the extra money used to form a library fund, how far might it not reach if as much is being done as is seemingly without any definite library fund?

Since these are Federal prisoners might not the library service in their behalf be considered as part of the extension department work of the National library? If to have a trained librarian in each prison library is not practical at present, would it not be possible for a trained librarian in the employ of the government choose and establish a given collection of catalogued books in a given prison; show the chaplain a few of the first principles of handling the collection; and then go on to the next prison, returning to each in turn at stated intervals? The public outside prison walls has this service which perhaps that part of the public within needs more if it is to learn to take a proper place in the outside world again after release. From the sheer utilitarian point of view, might it not PAY to render this segregated group a service that might teach its members to take a proper law abiding position in the world and not have to return to prison confines and public expense?

Miriam Roe

Prison population

Leavenworth, Kas.

Population
Av. daily cost
per man.

Lib. statistics

Lib. expenses

Atlanta, Ga.

Population
Av. daily cost
per man

Lib. statistics

Lib. expenses

McNeil Isle, Wash.

Population
Av. daily cost
per man

Lib. statistics 2

Lib. expenses

Nat'l. training sch. boys

Population
Av. daily cost
per person

Lib. statistics

Lib. expenses

Nat'l. training sch. girls

Population
Av. daily cost
per person

Lib. statistics

Lib. expenses

M.R.

SURVEY OF

U. S. FEDERAL PRISON LIBRARIES

	1924	1923	1922	1921	1920	1919	1918	1917	1916	1915
Prison population	7,667	7,065	6,395	5,268	4,737	4,788	4,482	3,757	4,276	4,021
Leavenworth, Kas.										
Population	2,532	2,500	2,243	1,721	1,893	1,895	1,613	1,677	1,664	1,160
Av. daily cost per man.	$.71	$.70	.82	.97	1.05	.92	.82	.69	.59	.61
Lib. statistics	—	500 v. added to the lib.	350 v. added to the lib.	8,000 v. in lib. 255,500 v. circ.	1,000 v. added 191,247 v. circ.	149,620 v. circ.	9,067 v. in lib. 148,457 v. circ	100,350 v. circ.	8,800 v. in lib. 76,195 v. circ.	30,805 v. circ.
Lib. expenses	—	—	—	—	for bks., lib. and technical $1,331.58	Bks. & mag. $184.84	Lib. bks. period and supplies $186.43	$1,105.89	$341.99	$404.86
Atlanta, Ga.										
Population	2,608	2,372	2,170	1,830	1,661	1,549	1,268	1,176	1,139	893
Av. daily cost per man	$.74	.80	.77	.92	.86	.77	.79	.63	.56	.67
Lib. statistics	32,000 v. in lib.	20,000 v. in lib. 141,677 v. circ.	101,944 circ.	80,050 circ	3,623 v. in lib. 77,714 v. circ.	68,796 v. circ.	61,137 v. circ.	69,007 v. circ	15,000 v. in lib. 55,251 v. circ.	12,397 v. in lib. 38,262 v. circ.
Lib. expenses	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
McNeil Isle, Wash.										
Population	512	478	372	241	205	268	239	233	212	212
Av. daily cost per man	$.80	.81	.89	1.17	1.18	.90	.82	.68	.94	.55
Lib. statistics	3,425 v. in lib. 22,273 v. circ	3,246 v. in lib. 25,667 v. circ	2,751 v. in lib. 20,572 v. circ.	2,731 v. in lib. 12,186 v. circ.	2,630 v. in lib. 10,181 v. circ	13,562 v. circ.	11,000 v. circ	2,391 v. in lib. 10,950 v. circ	2,357 v. in lib.	
Lib. expenses	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	$3.75	—	—
Nat'l. training sch. boys										
Population	316	298	329	341	389	361	389	429	424	363
Av. daily cost per person	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Lib. statistics	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Lib. expenses	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Nat'l. training sch. girls										
Population	70	60	119	107		101	83	89	77	78
Av. daily cost per person	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Lib. statistics	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Lib. expenses	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

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